SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS (TX)
24 February 1985

Intelligence agencies vital to U.S. security

By FRANK NORRIS

The American intelligence effort, always a lively subject, has recently received much media coverage, generally critical in tone. This serves only to confuse a difficult subject beyond the comprehension of even well-informed Americans. It may help to stand back and view U.S. intelligence problems in the light of some unchanging characteristics.

A historical review can then relate these characteristics and qualities to the current situation, and provide guidelines for better understanding.

Asymmetries

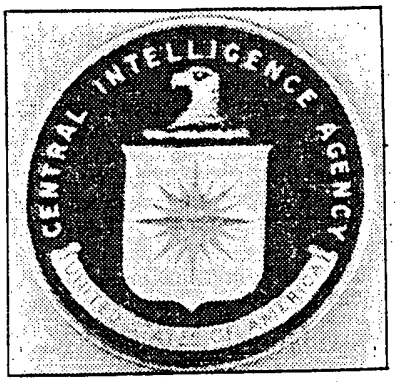
Serious strategists continuously search for asymmetries — those unalterable factors that grant a major advantage or dictate a major disadvantage to either of two contestants.

Our asymmetry in the intelligence field can be stated as follows: The United States, which is the most porous, least security-conscious nation and, in turn, tends to treat all intelligence as a dirty game, is the one nation above all that needs a continuous flow of accurate and timely intelligence. This need stems directly from our basic national policy of containment toward the Soviets and from our basic national military policy of deterrence.

These policies place us routinely in a reactive, not aggressive, posture. In this situation, national intelligence is inescapably our first line of defense. Not so for the Soviets. They are the most closed, security-conscious society and recognize all intelligence as a way of life. Moreover, with their basic policies of worldwide pressure and cautious opportunism, their actual need for intelligence is less acute than ours.

Fragility

Intelligence agencies are fragile, both in terms of their manpower and in terms of the policy and financial support granted them by the president, Congress and the American people. This support must be constant, quiet and more than simply adequate. It must be maintained at a level above the bureaucratic haggling and nit-picking that govern most resource allocations; and the internal use of this support must be the basic prerogative of the intelligence agencies themselves, of course with essential oversight by a small group of informed members of Congress and the executive branch.



Our national intelligence efforts require only the best people. Almost by definition, they must be intelligent — not just efficient and not just adequate, but the best. Fortunately, the important early leaders of our intelligence programs — "Wild Bill" Donovan, Gen. Walter Bedell Smith and Allen Dulles — recognized this necessity and recruited a remarkable group of talented, able men.

U.S. intelligence requires not only the best people, it also needs the most positive protection both legally and institutionally for them. Under current policies and conditions they do not have this full measure of protection; it should be provided.

It is timely to note one little-known fact about our intelligence people. On the whole, the CIA and other intelligence agencies have done a superb job in screening, recruiting and retaining excellent people. To public knowledge, only one traitor (Phillip Agee) has disgraced the CIA; he now languishes in Libya, deprived of U.S. passport and citizenship. Unfortunately, a few other employees, some at high levels, have permitted a desire for dollars or media attention to skew their judgment and have come forth with distressing books, statements and actions. But, when measured in terms of the many thousands involved, our intelligence people have been remarkably dedicated, efficient and trustworthy.

Man and machine

A balanced intelligence program is targeted at both the man and the machine — in intelligence jargon, humint (human intelligence) and technical intelligence. Translated: In a totally hypothetical situation wherein Chernenko and Gorbachev are playing golf, our technical intelligence people would turn their capabilities to finding out the type and capabilities of the instant communications they used; our humint people would want to get hold of the caddy to find out what they talked about.

This is not an either/or situation. Our national need is for both types of intelligence; there is no way that technical intelligence alone will suffice. As a nation with an almost childlike faith in technology, this necessity for a human balance may come as a bit of a shock to us; but it is a real necessity. The big problem is that humint involves us in covert operations that automatically encounter our deep-seated moral and psychological barriers, plus a potential for an undue degree of Congressional oversight, control and leaks.

Question: How covert is a covert operation when current procedures require that not less than 27 members of Congress and 34 staff and administrative personnel be advised of the planned operation before it occurs — and this in the leakiest of all capitals?

Excesses and failures

A continuing concern of our people and our national leadership is that there be no excesses or failures in our intelligence operations and that our operations be conducted in accordance with high moral standards that are not offensive to our national psyche. This is an admirable and understandable concern, but highly unrealistic.

One must recognize that in our democratic society, any intelligence system is automatically an excess. "Gentlemen do not read other men's mail." Thus spoke Secretary of State Henry Stimson during World War I. Much of that lofty attitude still remains, so U.S. covert operations are judged guilty until proved innocent.

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Also, important intelligence operations are inherently high-risk ventures; some excesses and failures are literally unavoidable. None of this rationale can stand as an excuse for such mismanagement and misuse as occurred in the Bay of Pigs or the assassination of Diem. We must, however, strive for some degree of national sophistication that can balance such failures against the necessity for success in many other operations, where, for the soundest of reasons, our intelligence achievements remain unmentioned.

Internationalism

National intelligence is an international game. Like it or not, this internationl game is played by international rules, not by our national rules. This hard fact creates special difficulties for Americans because we don't like games where we don't write the rules or even understand them. There is also a deep moral dilemma here: Do we abandon all rules except naked self-interest, like the Soviet's intelligence effort; or do we become impotent Lord Chesterfields by following the rules of the Church committee, the Pike committee and the Hughes-Ryan amendment?

This dilemma poses an almost "Red or dead" situation, but it can be solved by a balance between the two approaches. The wise course for us is to recognize the essentiality of our national moral code, to assure minimum but effective Congressional and Executive supervision and to provide enough flexibility for our intelligence agencies to get the job done. Under this system, Americans must expect errors and mistakes, some of them egregious; but these are unavoidable, and should be dealt with calmly and forcefully, to include disciplinary action when merited.

Historical review

Any historical perspective on national intelligence must begin with the clear understanding that, prior to Pearl Harbor and World War II, the United States had no truly national intelligence organization or operations. The Army, Navy and State Department each had highly independent, uncoordinated agencies totally inadequate to deal with the global demands they confronted. Pearl Harbor was the disastrous consequence. It stands today as an enduring caution to anyone who might wish to downgrade our existing intelligence effort.

Into this intelligence vacuum stepped "Wild Bill" Donovan and his Office of Strategic Studies (OSS). Donovan recruited men of extraordinary caliber and created a remarkable organization. There were, of course, many failures; but overall Donovan and the OSS granted U.S. intelligence a sense of dedication, esprit de corps and expertise that should be its hallmarks today. Unfortunately, the OSS was one of the many victims of the hysterical post-WW II demobilization. But, President Truman did recognize the necessity for a formally constituted national intelligence agency.

There were, of course, many bureaucratic fits and starts in the actual establishment of the CIA, but this was successfully accomplished by the National Defense Act of 1947. The tenure of two early CIA directors is notable. Retired Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, who had been Eisenhower's chief of staff, imparted top-quality management and bureaucratic clout to the agency. Allen Dulles, who had superb OSS training under Donovan and was a brother of the redoubtable John Foster, embarked on far-reaching operations that made the CIA a most significant factor in our Cold War activities. Dulles departed after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, one of several incidents that triggered increasing Congressional concern with CIA and its management.

This concern led to the first of two disasters that has afflicted our intelligence programs: the Congressional investigations conducted by Sen. Frank Church and by U.S. Rep. Otis Pike during 1974-75. Perhaps the less said about the activities of these two committees the better, but it should be noted that the highly damaging report of the Pike Committee was first leaked to Daniel Schorr who leaked it to the *Village Voice* which published the worst. The Church Committee, whose chairman publicly characterized the activities of the CIA as those of a "rogue elephant," fitted that characterization itself by advancing a series of recommendations for Congressional control and oversight which, if enacted, would have emasculated our national intelligence effort.

The long-term impact of these investigations is manifold. Perhaps most important is the irretrievable loss of faith in our intelligence system by our allies. This was coupled with immense bureaucratic and management confusion within our fragile intelligence community; and the most immediate of all consequences was a massive degradation in the morale, esprit and attitude of our intelligence community.

These investigations were reinforced by the Hughes-Ryan Amendment, which was adopted as a rider to the Foreign Aid Act in 1975. This amendment was sponsored by Sen. Harold Hughes, a one-term senator from Iowa, and U.S. Rep. Leo Ryan of California.

The amendment required that up to six full committees of Congress, plus related staff, be informed of covert activities before they occurred. The impact of this misguided legislative missile was to deny any significant covert capability to the United States, because the certainty of leaks rendered any serious proposal self-destructing.

The first disaster was rapidly compounded by a second: the tenure of two directors of CIA, James Schlesinger, who served briefly for President Ford, and Stansfield Turner, who served throughout President Carter's term. Both moved into a once-proud, elite organization whose morale had been shattered by the Congressional investigations. Confronting this situation, their principal task should have been to provide wise, compassionate, aggressive leadership; quietly conduct some essential reorganization; and thus put the ship of intelligence back in shape. Both ignored this primary task and concentrated instead on an effort to emasculate much of the humint capabilities of the CIA, purportedly to achieve a needed balance in the operations and product of the agency.

During their tenure, approximately 2,200 managers and operators involuntarily left the covert intelligence operations of the CIA. This hemorrhage of covert talent cost our national intelligence effort about 30,000 years of humint expertise. Such expertise is, of course, irreplaceable in the short term; we will face a deficit in this vital capability for many years.

The first Reagan administration has mounted a concerted effort to revive our national intelligence effort, first by the appointment of Director William Casey, a seasoned public servant who worked ably under Donovan in the OSS. A new Presidential Executive Order has maintained the desired thrust for Congressional monitorship but radically reduced the detailed nature thereof; this order also restored some flexibility to intelligence operations. A most heartening sign has been a marked revival of interest on the part of talented young men in serving in the CIA.

We can expect that renewed emphasis on, and support for, intelligence operations will characterize the current Reagan administration; but, regardless of the nature of this

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support, it will certainly be responsive to the valid requirement for essential Congressional oversight.

From all this background, some guidelines may be drawn. The first is a stricture on the agencies themselves. Never again will our intelligence agencies be granted a blank check. They must be prepared to justify their operations with a minimum of media interference but a maximum of top-level, sensitive review. In particular, they must avoid covert operations that appear inexplicable or senseless.

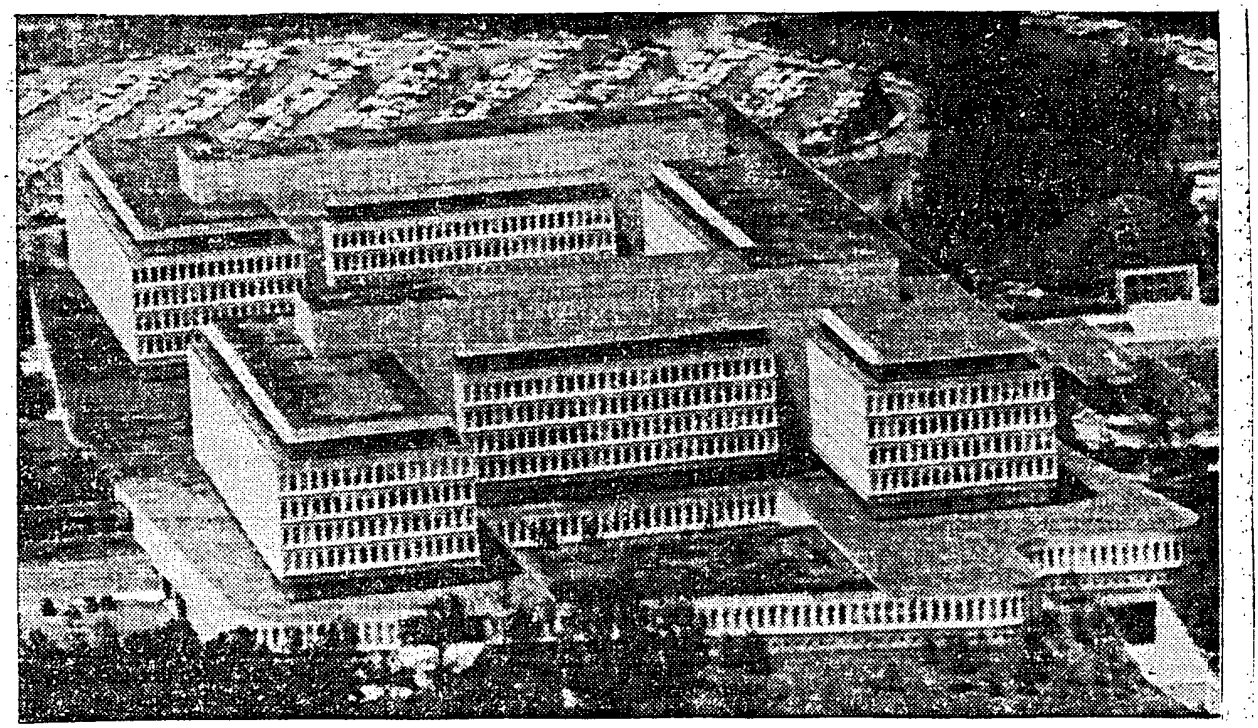
The second guideline applies to the Executive branch, including the president. The Executive branch must provide clear directives to the intelligence agencies, which will assure that the agencies do not react unpredictably or engage in operations the Executive branch did not anticipate — the Bay of Pigs and the assassination of Diem are tragic examples of failures to follow this guideline.

The third guideline applies to Congress. While recognizing that active Congressional oversight is essential and desirable, this oversight should be carried out by an absolute minimum number of highly qualified members and staff. The highest standards of internal security must be maintained. Never again should national intelligence become a political football or a media sideshow.

The last guideline is for the American public. Put your national intelligence effort into perspective. Insist that Congress and the Executive branch support it quietly, continuously and adequately by men of best quality and by money in sufficient quantity. Recognize that our intelligence effort will suffer from highly publicized excesses and failures; you will rarely know of its successes. Judge your agencies severely; hold them to high standards; but never demand perfection in this most imperfect of the arts and sciences.

Most important, *remember that national intelligence is our first line of defense.* If our intelligence is maintained strong and vital, we are safer at smaller cost. If we senselessly permit our intelligence to weaken and falter, the consequences can make Pearl Harbor look like a pink tea party.

Frank Norris is a retired military officer residing in San Antonio. He has never been a member of, or served with, any national intelligence agency. During many years of service as a field commander, senior staff officer and military educator, he became familiar with U.S. intelligence agencies, operations and people, and acquired considerable respect for them. This article reflects his personal views.



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HEADQUARTERS OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY IN LANGLEY, VA.
. . . 'if our intelligence is maintained, we are safer at smaller cost'